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ABSTRACT

The Learning Community program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh brings together four individual teacher education methods courses in an integrated block with clinical field experience. The program provides teacher educators the opportunity to integrate their instruction with other courses and contextualize the learning of students with classroom experiences. For one teacher educator in the program, the most satisfying collaborative relationship within the Learning Community was with his colleagues. The forum provided the teacher educators with their first opportunity to discuss their teaching and to discover what the others were doing. The teacher educator's involvement with the Learning Community caused him to become reinvolved with cooperating teachers after an extended absence from the field of supervision. The Learning Community gave cooperating teachers more voice. Also the Learning Community provided cooperating teachers enhanced credibility. Students' responses to this new way of teaching and learning were negative--the two lowest sets of ratings one teacher educator received from groups of students were from the first two cohort groups in the Learning Community. Continuing concerns include (1) how to form communities of learners that are truly inclusive and promote a positive experience for all involved; and (2) whether contextualizing learning causes students to value methods instruction more, or whether the teacher educators find themselves competing with the field experience. (RS)

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(Panel)

(Continuing the Dialogue:
Conversations about Change in Teacher Education Programs)
"Collaboration Within and Beyond the Campus Community"

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CATALYST FOR CHANGE

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For eight years, I was involved in the teaching of elementary reading methods courses for preservice teacher education students. For the most part, these courses were taught in isolation from other methods courses and removed from any field experience. In essence, two of the major themes I often advocated -- integration and contextualization of learning -- were not present in my own teaching. While my teaching was usually well-received by students, I felt the need to address these concerns. I readily accepted the invitation to join a pilot "learning community" which would bring together for the first time four individual methods courses in an integrated block with a clinical field experience. Students would enroll in the block as a cohort group and take all four courses during the same semester. Scheduling would be structured with an "in-out" format so that students combined method course instruction with time spent in the field. As a methods instructor, I would also be involved with supervising some of the students in their field experiences. The learning community would hold regular meetings during which student and teacher representatives would meet with the involved faculty to discuss the program and chart its future.

The Learning Community program provided me with the opportunity to integrate my instruction with other courses and contextualize the learning of my students with classroom experiences. It required, however, a level of collaboration which had not been present in most of my previous university teaching. As I near the end of my third semester of teaching and supervising in the Learning Community, I would like to share some insights and questions which have surfaced for me. I would like to look at three general relationships: collaboration with my colleagues, collaboration with cooperating teachers and collaboration with students.

CAN WE (FINALLY) TALK?
COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES

For me the most satisfying collaborative relationships within the Learning Community have been with my colleagues. The forum provided us with our first opportunity to discuss our teaching. We needed to discover what others were doing as we adjusted and aligned schedules, assignments, and course content. While I feel true integration of the four courses has yet to emerge, I have been able to make some connections between what I am teaching and what my colleagues are doing. For me, knowledge about reading strategies can find a more meaningful home in the planning of social studies and science instruction. Students have acknowledged the value of these efforts to make connections.

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Beyond benefits for my teaching, my own professional development activities have been extended because of my involvement with the Learning Community. It provided us with the opportunity to discover similar professional interests and led to collaborative projects. For example, my own concerns about recognizing the possibilities of using transformative literature in whole language classrooms and promoting the use of social action projects as a way of responding to those texts was matched by a colleague's interest in incorporating social action as a part of seriously exploring critical issues during social studies themes. We embarked on a collaborative journey of discovering resources which could be use to promote social action as a response to literature. It presented us with a new opportunity for professional growth.

A final benefit is more personal. Being involved with the Learning Community has afforded me an opportunity to establish closer relationships with these colleagues. Perhaps the additional time that we spend together or the atmosphere of increasing trust within the community has allowed us to disclose sides of ourselves which usually stay more protected when working with colleagues who are less familiar or in situations which are less comfortable.

While I feel the benefits clearly outweigh concerns, I see some three important issues for further dialogue:

1) How do we achieve greater integration of our courses and further break down the walls between these learning experiences? Are we just modeling side-by-side teaching that still keeps the subject areas fairly separate?
2) How do we avoid the goals for one course becoming usurped by another course as we work harder to help students see the connections between courses? Does this kind of teaching cause a shift in focus which provides less attention to other important course specific goals?
3) How blurry is the line between collaboration and competition when one teaches side-by-side with colleagues to the same group of students? Do certain institutional constraints, such as required student opinion surveys, allow for a more critical comparison by students which is less evident when one teaches in isolation?

WHO DO I THINK I AM?
COLLABORATION WITH COOPERATING TEACHERS

My involvement with the Learning Community has caused me to become reinvolved with cooperating teachers after an extended absence from the field of supervision. The program had as one of its basic premises that the instructors of the method courses would supervise the students in their field experiences. Some have suggested that the decision to involve the method instructors in supervising was critical for breaking down the perceived hierarchy of roles that often exist within colleges of education. For me, I enjoy supervision because it provides me with easy access to classroom contexts which are filled with wonderful stories. These experiences have informed my thinking

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and influenced my practice. It also provides me with an opportunity to get to know my students better as teachers, something I am unable to do effectively by only knowing them as students in my classroom.

Supervision within the Learning Community is different from my past experiences and has created a unique relationship with cooperating teachers. First, our Learning Community has given cooperating teachers more voice. Representatives from each of our school sites are invited to our community meetings and provided a forum for voicing their comments and concerns about the program. Many times they become a critical voice that I now need to attend to -- a voice which had never been present when I taught courses removed from the field.

Secondly, our Learning Community has provided cooperating teachers enhanced credibility. Because they are in the "real" setting, and we have placed a value on students learning in the those settings, the cooperating teacher becomes a potential new credible authority for my students. This is not a new dilemma for supervisors. Many times supervisors struggle with students wondering who we are to make suggestions when the cooperating teacher suggests something different. Since my instruction is now integrated with these field experiences, I must address this challenge as a part of my instruction.

I don't want to suggest that my relationships with cooperating teachers within the Learning Community have been primarily adversarial. In fact, almost all of the cooperating teachers with whom my students have worked provide classroom contexts which neither conflict with what I am teaching nor constrain students from attempting to apply what they have been learning. Over the past three semesters, I have been able to establish enjoyable ongoing relationships with these teachers; however I do have two concerns as I continue to work with them:

1) How do we collaborate with teachers that provide contexts for learning which do conflict with what we are teaching or constrain students from applying what they are learning? How do we avoid relationships which are often perceived as primarily adversarial?
2) How do we foster true mutual collaboration with cooperating teachers? Will they come to value what we have to offer in promoting change within their professional contexts as we begin to value their voice in promoting change within our professional contexts?

IF I AM TEACHING SO MUCH BETTER, HOW COME THEY DON'T REALIZE IT?

COLLABORATION WITH STUDENTS

Because I believe teachers should provide learning experiences which are integrated and contextualized, and I want to model that in my own practice, I became involved with the Learning Community. I believe that my teaching is better integrated and more contextualized than it has ever been. Despite this, I am puzzled by my students' responses to this new way of teaching and learning. While I do not want to place too much value on student opinion surveys conducted at the end of the semester, it is hard for me to overlook the fact that the two

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lowest sets of ratings I have every received from groups of students were from the first two cohort groups in the Learning Community. I am struggling to discover what has caused this change. Some have suggested that since the Learning Community provided students with greater voice and additional experiences, they might have a tendency to be more critical of any teaching they are experiencing. Perhaps previously discussed side-by-side teaching or the emergence of new more credible authorities created a more critical context for analyzing what I was doing. In examining their feedback, I was unable to reconcile how I felt about my teaching and how my students responded to it.

One possible factor may be that the cohort group of students met everyday. As an instructor, I usually only met with them weekly. The students have indicated that being involved in the Learning Community allowed them to form very close relationships with one another -- more so than participation in previous classes. Unfortunately, this closeness may also lead to some "group behavior" which may lead to the exclusion of some members of the community. I began to compare this experience to teaching an interim or summer course. Those courses also involve a cohort of students meeting everyday, but I am also there with them everyday. The sense of community that develops in these instructional settings seems somewhat different for me than the sense of community developed in the Learning Community where I am only a part-time member.

Like any educator confronted with negative feedback from external sources, my immediate reaction was to retreat, to return to what seemed like a safer way of teaching. In order to do that I would have to abandon what I believed about teaching and learning. Rediscovering and revaluing what I believed was critical for me to continue on this journey, but I continue to struggle with the following concerns as I consider future relationships with students:

1) How do we form communities of learners that are truly inclusive and promote a positive experience for all involved?
2) Does contextualizing the learning of students cause them to value methods instruction more or do we find ourselves competing with the field experience?

FINAL THOUGHTS

I recently attended a teacher education workshop where one educator suggested we examine the assumptions underlying our teacher education programs. For me, I assumed that integration and contextualization would enhance my teaching and my students learning. In order to accomplish those goals, I needed to enter into collaborative relationships with my colleagues, with cooperating teachers and with students. Each of those relationships has led to some truly beneficial outcomes, but each has also led me to continue to questions the assumptions underlying our teacher education programs.

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